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The Méhes Family: Our Righteous Gentiles

The year was 1943.

Méhes Geza and Biró Zoli worked side by side at the Hungarian Kodak plant. Méhes Geza was about thirty five years old and Biró Zoli was ten years his senior. Zoli was the chief accountant. Geza was the production manager.

Geza's job involved seeing that quotas were met, photographic film quality remained high, machines were running smoothly, without breakdowns, and such matters. The ten people in the shop liked to work for Geza. He was cheerful and he greeted everyone as they came in the morning. He knew whose baby was sick and whose wife was expecting. He took pride in being a responsible family man. He brought flowers to his wife on her name day, birthday and even on Mother's Day. He helped out around the house and lent his wife an arm to lean on.

Zoli on the other hand stayed close to his desk, nose to the grindstone, eyes on the company's ledgers and balance sheets, making sure that outstanding bills were collected and that the company's cash flow was on the positive side. Zoli was a family man also. He was proud of his efficient wife and his two little daughters. Geza was Protestant and attended Unitarian service. Zoli was a reform Jew. Zoli's father changed the family name to Biró when his son graduated high school. They wanted to be assimilated Hungarians. Their original name, Hochstadter, sounded too Germanic.

The two men usually shared their noonday meal at the cafeteria. Geza saved a seat for Zoli since Zoli was slower in making the selections from the steam table. Zoli would usually get a large carafe of coffee to share with Geza.

Today the two men decided to talk about the political situation in Europe. They both were upset about German dominance and the occupations of Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia. The war was causing many casualties on all the fronts and the mood of the two men was pessimistic. They were concerned with a possible German occupation of Hungary, in spite of Horthy's clever politics and his make believe collaboration with Hitler. Zoli expressed fears about his family's safety. He heard news of labor camps and the detention of able bodied Jewish men taking place in the adjoining nations.

Geza solemnly promised Zoli his help when the need would arise. Geza was a humanitarian and, coming from Transylvania, he was a brave and fearless man. He always backed up with words with deeds. Zoli had confidence that Geza would keep his promise and would provide him and his family with help. ✓

This year the two men celebrated the New Year with their wives at a nearby restaurant. Geza's spouse, Manyi, was a shy brunette with a gentle smile. She was from a small town in Transylvania. Big city life was still new and complicated for her. She and Geza lived on the outskirts of town in an apartment house in the garden district of Budapest. Their daughter, Agi, was a precocious, skinny three year old. They told stories of her little mischiefs. Zoli's wife of seventeen years, Sari, was an excellent cook and hostess. She had grown up in the city and managed a big, centrally located apartment with windows facing the Danube. Sari's father lived with them. Sari was in charge of live-in household help: a cook, a cleaning woman and a live-in German governess for the girls. The two women, Manyi and Sari, became good friends and promised to get together often.

On March 19, 1944, the German troops marched into Budapest. They brutally arrested Jews on the streets. A reign of terror had begun. The population spread the news by word of mouth. The radio played only military marches all day long. Zoli and Sari and their family cowered indoors and fearfully looked out of the windows. The streets remained empty, at least where they lived. Geza went to the plant early the next day. He encountered the German trucks with soldiers in full military readiness all along the main boulevards. The soldiers were taking over the big hotels, and moved into hospitals and schools for lodging. Nonetheless, Geza opened up the shop and conducted business as usual. Only the Christian employees dared to come to work. Zoli decided to stay home and not risk being apprehended. He knew that new ordinances would be made public as the German occupiers established their rule.

On April 5, 1944, restrictions affecting Jews were posted on all public buildings. Jews were to wear yellow stars, could leave their homes only between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. They were not permitted to own any weapons, radios or gold jewelry. These were to be turned in immediately to district police headquarters. Males between the ages of 18 and 50 were to report for so called Labor Service to build irrigation ditches and do road repair in the provinces. Zoli had to report immediately. He was to carry with him enough clothes to last a week, no other personal belongings.

On August 10, 1944, the Jews had to leave their homes and crowd into pre-selected Jewish houses. These houses had large yellow stars affixed at the entrance. This way everyone knew where the Jews were herded. One family to a room, and four families were to share cooking and bathing facilities. Sari, her old father and the two girls left their spacious home and moved in with the Schwartz family in a designated nearby building. The servants had already been dismissed. Jews were not allowed to hire household help. The family learned deprivation and overcrowding.

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Tension built up as people were deprived of their freedom. The heat of summer, paired with the fear and anxiety of being locked up with strangers, the unavailability of fresh food and sanitation, challenged everybody's nerves. Fights broke out. Spirits dimmed. Zoli had been away for months. He wrote postcards to reassure his family that he was well.

On October 14, 1944, Sarika decided to take off her yellow star and seek help to save her family. She met Geza and consulted with him on how to rescue her family. Geza had been thinking for months on how to help Zoli and his family. He whispered his plan to Sari.

"If you could get Christian papers from someone and change your identity I could help you hide in an apartment near where we live. I know a man who recently divorced his wife and he was taken to the Russian front. His apartment is empty and we could use it for you to hide. It is so far from your neighborhood that nobody would know who you are. You and the family could take shelter there."

Sari went home and started to carry out the plans she was preparing to go into hiding. She visited the janitor in her old apartment house. He was willing to help her. Her old cleaning woman had a similar age daughter, ^{as she was} ~~Mariska, to Sari~~, and two grandchildren about the age of Sari's daughters. When the ordinance was issued in April, Sari kept her gold bracelet and engagement ring. She had hid these in the heels of her shoes. She sold these and bought Christian birth certificates for the whole family. She did this without wearing the yellow star and hoping she would not be apprehended. Then she met Geza's wife, Manyi, and planned the big escape. The two women planned to take a street car with the two girls to the hiding place in Zuglo. Geza would accompany Grandfather as if he was taking him to the hospital. Everyone would wear double shirts and double undergarments and carry only a handbag. The girls would hold their dolls and wear cheerful white bows in their braids. They were to pretend that this was just a family outing and not an escape into hiding.

In November, 1944, Zoli was moved to Csepel with his Forced Labor Brigade. The Allied bombings had been steady and much of the industrial complex of Weis-Manfred factory had been destroyed. This factory manufactured farm machinery and complex military equipment as well. The Jewish labor brigade was given the dangerous task of removing unexploded bombs and clearing away the debris left after the bombings. Zoli continued to write postcards to his family to stay in touch.

Sari bought the necessary birth certificates. She assumed the identity of a widow called Mrs. Kapetter who fled with her daughters from Russian occupied Transylvania. The two daughters were Susan (Zsuzsa) and Judith. Grandfather was to be somebody else's *pater familias* by the name of Uncle Wendell. Sari immediately started to memorize the statistics, like the birthdays, her wedding date, the date of the disappearance of her husband on the Russian front, the origins of the family, and which Catholic church they previously attended. The two girls were also drilled into their new identities. The older daughter, Agi, who was twelve, was fully aware of the dangers they were facing from both the Germans as well as the new Hungarian Nazi police, the Arrow Cross. The younger daughter, Ann, who was eight, was a perfect mimic. She memorized all the needed information. Grandfather, who had to become uncle Wendell, was a reluctant participant in this potentially fatal charade. He was an honest, law abiding citizen and resented the necessity to pretend and role play. He spoke little and kept to himself.

The family managed to get to their new hiding place. Grandfather took shelter in a corner and read. He ventured into the kitchen sometimes to peel potatoes and help with the kitchen work. The windows were covered with blackout fabric and Sari was the one who dared to go out when the food supplies ran low. She stored as many dry staples as was available at the war torn shops: dry beans, peas, potatoes, onions, carrots and whatever shortening was available, lard and cooking oil.

At night Geza would come with supplies. He'd throw a pebble at the first story window to alert the family that a friend had come to call. He always brought some needed items: heating coal, candles, news from Zoli, or a bit of encouraging political information, about the end of the war being in sight. The Russian troops were surrounding Budapest by now and the Germans were fleeing west. But the Hungarian Arrow Cross was as vicious and brutal as ever. They were liquidating all the Jewish ghetto houses by taking groups of people and shooting them in rows and dumping the bodies into the Danube. People who were caught hiding were shot on the spot.

Early in December Zoli arrived at the hiding place. He had bribed one of the guards at the labor camp. He had had a diamond ring sewn into the lining of his coat and used it to escape from the barracks. He made the guard swear on the life of his only child that he would not reveal where he accompanied Zoli, the family's hiding place.

December 15. The bombs fell in clusters. Now the family had to go to the coal shelter to hide --- Sari, the girls, and Grandfather, that is, the people who had proper papers in case of a raid. Zoli remained upstairs in the apartment with bombs exploding right and left. One explosion came right next door and the bomb fragments penetrated the wall where he was taking shelter. He avoided being hit and injured by about a five inch margin. He was lying down and the metal fragment penetrated the wall above his head.

January 7, 1945. The Russian forces liberated the outskirts of Budapest. The Biró family could not reveal their true identity yet, fearing that the Germans may return. The fighting ^{moved from} moving street to street and the military front kept changing. The scarcity of food brought hunger. Pipes were frozen. There was no running water. Heating fuel was running out. People were miserable. The family dared not to leave the shelter. They huddled together for warmth and security. The Russian soldiers looted everywhere, raiding for valuables. They took watches, radios and whatever else they could carry.

June 1945. Zoli, Sari and family moved back to their old apartment house. The fourth floor had been hit by a bomb and much of their furniture was destroyed. They took shelter in an office suite on the second floor. They slept on the floor and used their suitcases as tables. The rugs were rolled and used as pillows. A little chestnut roasting stove provided both heat and means for cooking. It was a make shift arrangement but they were near their old home base. Zoli was able to scale the ruins and dig out precious clothing and linens from the dressers that have been flattened by the bombs. He also found old documents and family photographs buried under the rubble.

Later in June, Zoli went back to his old place of work. The Kodak plant was still smoldering from a fire and the windows were blown out. Zoli crawled in and found the old safe wide open, the ledgers intact and the company's records still bound together as he remembered them. He dragged these precious files to safety and hid them for safekeeping.

August 1945. Geza and Zoli were reunited at the factory after all these months of hardship. Zoli was still suffering from a bronchial infection and lost had 30 pounds. Geza's hair had turned white and he walked with a severe limp after a wall had fallen on him during a bombing. The two men looked at each other and embraced with the old friendship. Zoli had so much to thank his brave, honest and kind friend. He hoped to repay -- somehow, some way -- his colleague who had saved his life. This bond was never to be broken. It was stronger than a brotherhood.

Epilogue

September 1947. The Kodak plant was taken over the ruling Communist Party. Hungary was now under Russian domination. The old guard employees were all dismissed. Young, politically mainstream workers took over Geza's and Zoli's ^{long standing} positions. Their ^{now} loyalty and stead fastness was forgotten. The two men, at a loss, decided to form a small business venture. Geza bought a big, old truck with the financial help sent by Zoli's American relatives. He started to buy produce from the farmers and bring these agricultural products to the hungry and under supplied city dwellers in Budapest.

